

VZCZCXRO9367

RR RUEHAG RUEHAST RUEHDA RUEHFL RUEHIK RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHLN RUEHLZ  
RUEHPOD RUEHROV RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG  
DE RUEHDF #0017/01 1070950  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 160950Z APR 08  
FM AMCONSUL DUSSELDORF  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0129  
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE  
RUCNFRG/FRG COLLECTIVE  
RUEHDF/AMCONSUL DUSSELDORF 0145

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DUSSELDORF 000017

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [ELAB](#) [GM](#)

SUBJECT: THE LEFT PARTY IN NRW: AN EMERGING FACTOR IN STATE POLITICS

DUSSELDORF 00000017 001.2 OF 002

Sensitive but Unclassified -- Not for Internet Distribution

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Barely six months after forming its North-Rhine Westphalia chapter in October 2007, the Left Party is changing the political landscape in Germany's most populous state. The party is gaining in membership and in the opinion polls and already has its first state parliament (Landtag) member. The party has not adopted a formal platform, but some leaders appear to be attempting to moderate the leadership's rather hard line approach. With the NRW Social Democratic Party (SPD) in disarray, the Left Party will be a factor in the state elections in 2010, although it is much too early to predict how much. It is, however, likely to complicate coalition building. Having doubled its electoral support projections in the last 2-3 years, the party is trending upward. End Summary.

Hard Left Leadership, Increasing Membership  
-----

¶2. (SBU) When the Left Party established its chapter in NRW in October 2007 via the merger of two small left parties, the western WASG and eastern PDS, it was the last state in Germany to do so. Since then, the party has gained considerably in visibility and influence in the state. Its co-chairs, Wolfgang Zimmerman (formerly of the WASG) and Ulrike Detjen (formerly of the PDS), are pursuing a rather hard line, isolationist course, refusing Pol/Econ Officer's request for a meeting on the grounds that "U.S. policy is diametrically opposed" to their ideology and publishing their response in the Berlin left-wing newspaper JungeWelt. Left Party Bundestag Member Hueseyin-Kenan Aydin, a Turkish-born trade unionist and one-time SPD member from the Ruhr area who co-founded the NRW WASG, told Pol/Econ Officer that party leaders are still debating their course. While they appear extreme now, he expected them to moderate their tone and policy positions over time. He said he expressed dissatisfaction during internal meetings with Zimmermann and Detjen over their decision not to meet with us, arguing that dialogue is important and encouraging engagement with the USG.

¶3. (SBU) With some 6,300 members, Left Party membership in NRW is comparatively low (cf. Greens: 9,900 and FDP: 16,100), but the numbers have grown by approximately 15 percent since its formation, making it the only party in the state on the rise. Of its 132 elected officials statewide, the vast majority sit on city councils. The party also boasts a well structured organization with 52 local sub-districts. Their strategy is to focus on local elections in 2009 as a means to solidify their base and prepare for the 2010 Landtag elections. The press has reported that Zimmerman believes the party can enlarge its base in medium and large cities, drawing on disaffected SPD voters, particularly in the unions and in economically weaker regions like the Ruhr Valley. German Confederation of Trade Unions

(DGB) chairman in NRW Guntram Schneider indirectly confirmed this, telling the CG recently that many union leaders were attending Left Party speeches and events.

#### The Left Finds a Voice in the Landtag, Already

-----

¶4. (SBU) Although predecessors WASG and PDS separately obtained far less than the five percent needed to enter the state parliament in the 2005 state elections, the Left Party experienced its first major success soon after its formation, when independent deputy Ruediger Sagel (a former Green deputy) joined the party in late 2007, providing its first (and so far only) seat in the parliament. Sagel told Pol/Econ Officer he joined the party because the Greens had become "too mainstream." He has become prominent, in part because Green and SPD deputies use him as a conduit to voice some of their views.

#### Future Prospects

-----

¶5. (SBU) Recent opinion polls show the Left Party winning 6-8 percent of the NRW popular vote, if elections were held today. Many party leaders are optimistic about the party's prospects, given continued weakness in the state SPD leadership and discontent in the rank-and-file. They also expect their results to be even higher because many voters do not express their true opinions to pollsters, as happened recently in Lower Saxony. They express confidence that the SPD will have to consider some form of cooperation after 2010 if it wants to replace the CDU-FDP coalition.

#### SPD Does Not Foreclose Cooperation with the Left

-----

¶6. (SBU) In the past few months, SPD state parliamentary floor leader and SPD NRW chair Hannelore Kraft has publicly stated several times that in view of the emerging five-party political landscape, it would be "unwise" for her party to exclude a priori a coalition or cooperation with the Left Party, even if

DUSSELDORF 00000017 002.2 OF 002

she could not conceive of it at the moment due to the NRW Left Party's radical positions on various issues. Kraft indicated to the CG that it was not clear in which direction the Left Party in NRW would develop and which of the wings (PDS or WASG) would dominate. She said she was "appalled" by Zimmerman's lack of knowledge of basic economics, his support for nationalization of big industry, and his call for Germany's withdrawal from NATO and the EU. Describing Detjen as more "pragmatic" and "closer to reality," she said no one could foresee the Left Party's positions in 2010. Publicly, she has called Hesse SPD Chair Andrea Ypsilanti's campaign promise to desist from cooperation with the Left "a mistake," as she later had to break it.

#### Comment

-----

¶7. (SBU) It is much too early to speculate whether NRW could face a chaotic situation like that following the Hesse state elections in January. Unlike Ypsilanti, Kraft has refused to preclude cooperation with the Left Party, although there is opposition within her party to such a move. Based on current trends and barring major unforeseen developments, the party is likely to make it into the next Landtag, which could well complicate the formation of the next governing coalition. Its presence in the Landtag, albeit by a lone parliamentarian, has already given the party a more formal and visible role in state politics. Its participation in the next government would have negative implications for the United States.

¶8. (SBU) There appears to be debate within the NRW Left Party over its direction and policy platform. Its leaders are currently more hard line than at the national level, but some of their views could soften over time. It is not clear how strong the "moderates" are or how much they differ from the

leadership's current policy line. Membership, though growing fast, still lags well behind the FDP and Greens. The party appears to be gaining primarily at the expense of disaffected SPD voters and sees itself on something of a roll, but faces an SPD that is increasingly fighting back and will not give up easily.

19. (U) This message was coordinated with Embassy Berlin.  
BOYSE